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Windows Updates 'forced' on users

Microsoft has been accused of forcing Windows updates on users. Users who have chosen to be notified of updates but not to have them installed automatically recently had their computers updated regardless. This raised questions about who has control of your personal computer – you or the companies that write its software.

The move also caused concern among large companies that need to test software thoroughly before installing updates on all its computers. Microsoft claimed that the only updates it has enforced are those related to the updating software itself. If it had not forced the update, the company said, users would have been unable to continue to receive other updates.

"Windows Update is a service that primarily delivers updates to Windows. To ensure on-going

service reliability and operation, we must also update and enhance the Windows Update service itself, including its client side software," wrote Nate Clinton, product manager for Windows Update, on his blog.

Updating Windows is an important step in fending off security threats, and the software that checks for updates – known as Windows Update (WU) – is a core part of this necessary step. However, Microsoft's handling of this affair has caused much concern for home and business users.

Clinton now admits that Microsoft should have explained to users what was going on and why. "People have told us that we should have been clearer on how Windows Update behaves when it updates itself," he said. "We are now looking at the best way to clarify WU's behaviour to customers so that they can more clearly understand how WU works."

The company has also obliged MSN users to upgrade their internet messaging programs recently, although in a less stealthy way. The update in question fixed a security hole that allowed an attacker to access a victim's PC when they took part in a webcam or video chat session. To protect users, Microsoft ordered MSN users using vulnerable versions of the chat program to upgrade. Older versions of the program are unable to log on to the service until they have been updated.

A Microsoft security product manager acknowledged that some users may find the move draconian, but emphasised that it was for their own good. "Some of you might feel this inconvenient, but in order to protect you and protect the health of the network we have chosen to take this step," they said.



▲ Microsoft has come under fire for updating Windows systems even when users had chosen not to install automatic updates

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Microsoft offers Vista-to-XP 'downgrade'

Microsoft is offering a new option to PC manufacturers that will allow customers to downgrade a new Windows Vista-based system so that it runs Windows XP. Businesses and even many home users are reluctant to use Vista because of hardware and software compatibility issues.

Vista Business and Ultimate editions from some manufacturers, including HP and Fujitsu, will come with a special restore disc that allows buyers to revert to the older Windows XP operating system.

Microsoft has always granted the right to downgrade from Windows Vista. Its Volume Licensing

brief states: "OEM downgrade rights for desktop PC operating systems apply to Windows Vista Business and Windows Vista Ultimate as stated in the License Terms. Please note, OEM downgrade versions of Windows Vista Business and Windows Vista Ultimate are limited to Windows XP Professional (including Windows XP Tablet PC Edition and Windows XP x64 Edition)."



▲ You don't have to have Vista if you don't want it



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Microsoft loses anti-trust appeal

Microsoft has lost its appeal against a European Commission anti-trust ruling which found that the company had abused its dominant position to damage competitors. The company now faces a large fine and must sell versions of Windows that do not include Media Player. It must also cooperate with rivals, sharing information to allow other companies to write software that works with the operating system.

The initial EC ruling was made in 2004 and levied a record fine of £343m. Microsoft will now have to pay this along with a further fine of £195m for failing to follow the court's earlier order about sharing information.

Microsoft was found guilty of similar charges in the US during a case that ran for three years, from 1998 until 2001, when a settlement was reached. During this time one judge even ordered that Microsoft be split into two separate companies, although this decision was reversed on appeal.

Microsoft's main offence in the eyes of both the US and EU courts was that it acted in an overly aggressive way towards its rivals from the powerful position of having 95 per cent of the market. By abusing its monopoly, the company was able to crush competitors such as Netscape, which produced a popular web browser. Microsoft was able to include Internet Explorer as part of Windows, which made it unnecessary for users to install a third-party browser.



▲ The EU has slapped record £538 million fines on Microsoft after the company was found guilty of abusing its position

The company followed the same strategy with Media Player, providing users with all they needed to watch films and play music. Real, the business behind Real Player, complained that this was unfair. Sun Microsystems also joined the ranks of Microsoft's accusers. Its Java software was unattractive to Windows users, who already had Microsoft's Java system preinstalled.

Having software such as media players, web browsers and Java systems preinstalled is very

convenient for users. However, Microsoft's approach of including its own programs with its operating systems, which also happen to be the world's most popular choice by a long way, means that there is no incentive for PC manufacturers or users to seek out alternatives. In the long run this type of behaviour stifles innovation, removes choice and increases the price of software.

In 1999, US District Judge Thomas Jackson said: "Many of [Microsoft's] actions have harmed consumers in ways that are immediate and easily discernible. They have also caused less direct, but nevertheless serious and far-reaching, consumer harm by distorting competition."

The most important way that Microsoft damaged consumers was by the way it attacked other companies using its vast power. Only very few and brave businesses would tangle with Microsoft after learning of its history.

The Judge concluded his findings by saying: "Most harmful of all is the message that Microsoft's actions have conveyed to every enterprise with the potential to innovate in the computer industry. Through its conduct toward Netscape, IBM, Compaq, Intel and others, Microsoft has demonstrated that it will use its prodigious market power and immense profits to harm any firm that insists on pursuing initiatives that could intensify competition against one of Microsoft's core products."

Intel reveals details of cooler, faster processors

New range of chips unveiled at the company's developers' forum

Intel has announced further details of its upcoming range of processors. Speaking at the Intel Developer Forum in San Francisco, Intel's corporate vice-president Steven Smith explained how the new chips fitted into the company's Tick-Tock business plan. This plan alternates releasing a new silicon technology, in this case 45nm, with using a new design of microprocessor.

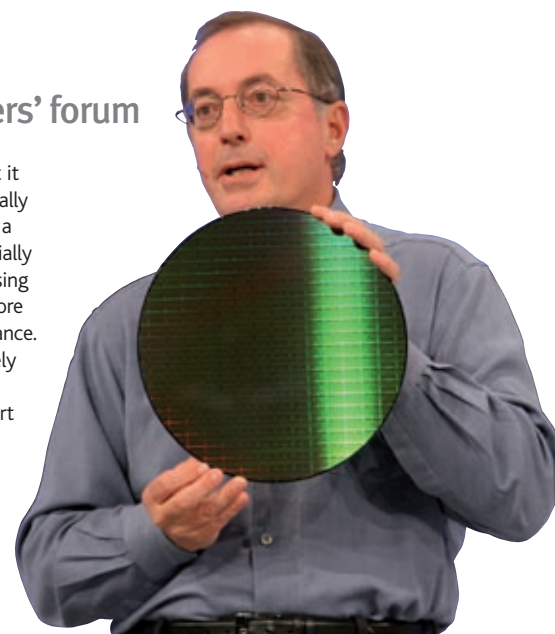
The 'Tick' in this new generation is a range of 45nm processors codenamed Penryn. These are based on Intel Core 2 Duo architecture, but add features such as the SSE4 instruction set. The chips will run cooler and be more power efficient, while the space saved by reduced die size will be partly used to house an increased cache. The first Penryn processors will be available from November 2007.

Smith also gave details of the Intel Core 2 Duo Extreme QX9650, a quad-core processor that runs at 3GHz. It has a 12MB cache and the

new SSE4 instruction set. Smith claims that it ran up to 13 per cent faster than an identically clocked previous generation processor over a range of applications. However, with a specially created DivX video-encoding benchmark using the new SSE4 instructions, it managed a more impressive 60 per cent increase in performance.

The 'Tock' part of the plan is a completely new architecture, designed for the 45nm process, codenamed Nehalem. It can support up to eight processing cores and is flexible enough to allow for the possibility of an integrated graphics chip on the processor die itself. It will also use Intel's new QuickPath architecture to speed up the movement of data between the multiple cores. Nehalem-based chips should be available from the second half of 2008.

Smith said that Intel should be able to deliver 32nm Westmere processors by 2009.



▲ Intel CEO Paul Otellini shows off a rather large Penryn wafer at the Intel Developer Forum

New card aims to replace your cash

Barclays Bank has launched a new card that combines a credit card with a cashless payment system and an Oyster travel card. Not only does this reduce the wad of plastic that many people have to carry in their wallets, but it could also lighten the load from pockets that are usually stuffed with loose change.

The company hopes its cashless payment system will make buying items of low value fast and easy. Instead of fishing around for coins to pay for a newspaper, a cup of coffee or a copy of *Computer Shopper*, customers will be able to use the card to pay for items costing up to £10.

The card uses the OneTouch payment system that will already be familiar to Londoners with an Oyster travel card. Placing the OnePulse card near to a receiver will conduct the transaction without the need to enter a personal ID number or sign a receipt.

The number of transactions customers can make with the Cashless OneTouch feature is limited only by the credit limit on the built-in credit card. This same account also funds the Oyster travel card, which means that those using it for pay-as-you-go travel won't have to worry about topping up the card manually. Season ticket holders can also load the card with their account details.

The wireless payment and travel card system uses radio frequency identification (RFID), which some believe poses a threat to individuals' privacy. The card contains a chip and an antenna, which is read by low-powered radio transmitters embedded in the OneTouch consoles.



▲ Barclaycard hopes its OnePulse card will replace cash, credit cards and Oyster travel cards

Theoretically, someone using high-powered transmitters could track the movements of card holders by reading their details. Barclaycard's OnePulse website seeks to reassure potential users, however: "If your Barclaycard OnePulse is lost, stolen or misused by someone without your permission, you will not be liable for any loss."

Additionally, the company claims that it will not be possible for you to make a payment accidentally, such as when walking past a till. "Your card has to be within four centimetres of the point of sale and the retailer must have first entered the amount for you to approve," said the Barclays website.

HD DVD players' prices plummet

Two manufacturers are claiming that they will sell HD DVD players for between £200 and £300 by Christmas this year. Toshiba, one of the companies that developed the HD DVD standard, says its new third-generation player will cost around £300 when it is launched in October. Meanwhile, Venturer Electronics claims that its own player will cost £200 when it appears on shelves "before Christmas".

Toshiba's HD-EP30, pictured right, is much slimmer than previous models and supports a variety of formats as well as HD DVD. These include standard DVD, DVD+/- R/RW, DVD-R DL and CD-R/-RW.

The HD-EP30 produces an output of 1080p and can upscale standard DVDs to 720p, 1080i and 1080p. The latter is a non-interlaced output sometimes referred to as 'full HD'. The player produces 24 frames per second, as you would experience in a cinema.

Details about Venturer's SHD7000 player are scarce, but the company claims its outputs will produce an interlaced 1080i signal. It includes Dolby TrueHD sound processing, a lossless audio technology that offers a bit-for-bit copy of the sound stored on the original master material.



▲ Toshiba's HD-EP30 HD DVD player will cost around £300 when it hits the shelves

Timeline Thirty-five years of movie media

The early 1970s see the first public demonstration of the Laserdisc, which measures 30cm in diameter. In 1975 JVC's VHS and Sony's Betamax start the fight for dominance as the standard tape recording format for video.



Audio CDs based on Laserdisc technology start to appear in the early 1980s. Video CDs become available in the mid-80s, providing five minutes of analogue video that can be viewed using compatible Laserdisc players.

Sony starts producing VHS players in 1988, effectively admitting the defeat of its Betamax technology.

A *Simpsons* character steals a VCR, later exclaiming, "On no! Beta!" A year later the video CD (VCD) standard is created, providing digital video footage quality comparable with that available with VHS. In 1996 DVD movies appear.



The popularity of VHS starts to decline. In 2004 Dixons, the UK's largest electrical chain, announces that it will no longer sell VHS VCRs. DVD becomes the most popular format. By 2006, Toshiba and NEC's HD DVD and Sony's Blu-ray start to fight it out for dominance as the standard digital recording format for video.

Some experts believe that the future of home video will involve streaming digital files from computers such as Media Center PCs or on-demand services using cable or internet services. This may allow users to view their movies using a variety of devices, including mobile phones.



1972

1982

1992

2002

2012



Office gets cheaper for students

Microsoft is allowing students to download copies of Office 2007 Ultimate Edition for just £39. Those who only want to use it for a year can get it for the even more surprising price of £12.95.

However, the deal is quite different from Microsoft's standard student licences, which have a wide remit and include students in full-

time education, their parents and teachers. The site requires buyers to have an email address supplied by a UK educational institution that has a .ac.uk suffix. They must also be enrolled in an undergraduate- or postgraduate-level course. Further Education students must have at least 15 hours of scheduled contact time for their course.

The offer is not indefinite and all downloads need to have been made by the end of April 2008. Microsoft refers to the offer as a 'trial' on its main website, and the software will run 25 times before reverting into a read-only package. However, buying a perpetual licence for £39 means that users can use the software forever.

STUDENTS ONLY!

the ultimate steal

Score the deal! Get Microsoft Office Ultimate 2007 for just £38.95. It's a total steal, save time and money with this premium offer. Office Ultimate 2007's brand new features and fresh look will help you organise and get all your work done in the blink of an eye. The Ultimate Steal is finally here, so grab it now!

GRAB IT! ▶ £38.95 Own it.

GRAB IT! ▶ £12.95 Use it for one year.

Office Ultimate 2007

See what Office 2007 has to offer. It's new, powerful and easy to learn more.

Am I Eligible?

What does it take to grab Office Ultimate 2007 for just £38.95? Click here to learn more.

Students will be able to use Office 2007 for a year for just £12.95

SP3 for Office

Microsoft has released a significant update for its Office 2003 suite. Service Pack 3 (SP3) contains a number of security and stability fixes, some of which were available previously. Users who have ignored updates since Service Pack 2 (SP2) but install SP3 will get an additional 257 fixes.

As well as fixing bugs in all of the main programs included in Office 2003, the update also prevents Office applications from opening and saving certain file formats. The blocked formats compatible with Excel 2003, PowerPoint 2003 and Word 2003 formats include those used by the Lotus 1-2-3 and Quattro Pro spreadsheets, CorelDraw and .DIF and .SLK formats. Microsoft claims that these files have security issues. Word's Fast Save feature is also disabled to help prevent creating documents that contain unwanted hidden data.

One interesting update fixes a bug in Excel 2003 that occurs when pasting a selection of hyperlinks from one spreadsheet to another. It secretly pastes the unselected hyperlinks, too. As these are invisible to the eye but remain clickable, a user could accidentally paste sensitive data into a document for general publication. This problem was first fixed with a patch that Microsoft made available in July 2006.

Another bizarre bug involves Word failing to save formatting changes. The official description reads: "When another user opens a Word 2003 document that you saved in HTML format, the document is not formatted in the way that it was formatted when you saved it."

SP3 was released two years almost to the day after SP2 appeared. Full details of this latest update are available from <http://support.microsoft.com/kb/923618>, which also provides a link to download the necessary files.

Go online with a lamppost

BT is to provide fast networking connections to lampposts in an effort to provide faster broadband to homes and businesses. It has installed equipment that creates 100Mbit/s networking between its telephone exchanges and lampposts and telecoms cabinets. From here, fast connections could be extended to offices and residences.

The Street Access service is symmetrical, which means that upload speeds are potentially the same as download speeds. BT expects other companies to use this network to create services such as local wireless networking. It will be available anywhere in the UK, "subject to survey and reasonable demand," according to BT.

The independent website Thinkbroadband has calculated that, if the service was shared between 30 users, the rental could be as little as £9.50 per month. That could appeal to businesses paying £200 for a symmetric (SDSL) 2Mbit/s connection. However, the service is limited to a maximum fibre route length of 20km, so many rural areas are likely to miss out.

As well as creating an easy way to provide fast broadband, Street Access could herald the start of new types of services. BT claims that typical applications will include "public information points such as cinema listings and parking zones," as well as providing ad hoc connections for public occasions such as sports events.

Installation starts at £5,000 including VAT, with a similarly hefty rental charge, so home users will be able to use this system only via a third party, such as a wireless networking provider.

Telecoms regulator Ofcom does not believe that the future of broadband necessarily lies with fibre. Having assessed the options, it recently noted that the UK's telecoms infrastructure is very different to that of many other countries. Without being specific, Ofcom claims that the future may well include upgrades of BT's existing copper access network or improvements to Virgin Media's cable network. It may even involve a completely new deployment of wired or wireless infrastructure.

IN BRIEF

L'OREAL SUES EBAY

Cosmetics firm L'Oreal is suing eBay over the sale of counterfeit products through the online auction site. L'Oreal claims that eBay has profitted by taking commissions from payments for fake goods. The brands in question include Giorgio Armani, Lancôme and Ralph Lauren.

MOORE SURPRISED THAT HIS LAW STANDS

Gordon Moore, co-founder of Intel and creator of Moore's Law, claims to be surprised that the company continues to live up to the law that bears his name, whereby the number of transistors in a processor double every two years. He said, "The barriers that look like they're impenetrable seem to disappear as we get closer to them".

Despite this observation, he also claimed that there are likely to be some genuinely impenetrable barriers in the future. "I think in another decade, decade and a half, we'll hit something that is fairly fundamental," he said.

MAN DIES AFTER ONLINE GAMING BINGE

A Chinese man has died after playing games on the internet for three consecutive days. The 30-year-old man from Guangzhou died after being rushed to hospital from an internet cafe, *Beijing News* reports. "Police have ruled out the possibility of suicide," the newspaper wrote, adding that exhaustion was the most likely cause of death. It did not say what game he was playing.

EXCEL 2007'S TIMES TABLES WRONG

Excel 2007 appears to have a problem with simple multiplication. The bug was posted on a UseNet group by Mohlam Serry, who discovered that asking Excel to multiply 850x77.1 produced an answer of 100,000. It should be 65,535.

Some other combinations of equations that equal 65,535 are also affected by the bug, while others return the correct number. The number 65,535 will be familiar to programmers, as it is the highest number that can be stored in a 16-bit unsigned binary number. A problem with transitioning between 16-bit and 32-bit numbers may well be the cause.

IN BRIEF

MICROSOFT IMPROVES LIVE SEARCH

Microsoft has added features to its search engine and increased the number of webpages that it indexes in an effort to compete with Google. Live Search now includes an improved image search that allows users to resize images on the screen and drag them to an area to save them as a collection.

\$25,000 MOBILE PHONE

Nokia has launched a limited edition mobile phone together with Ferrari. The \$25,400 (around £12,700) Ascent Ferrari is made from titanium, comes in a red and black leather case and is limited to 60 units. It is shaped like a sports car.

GOOGLE MAIL MAY BE HACKABLE

The founder of a self-styled 'hacker organisation' has discovered a security hole in Google Mail that allows an attacker to read victims' email messages. Published at <http://tinyurl.com/yysq2c>, his article explains how a bad website could hijack a Gmail session and forward all incoming messages to another address. This would continue until the victim noticed an unauthorised rule in the services Filters settings. Google has now fixed the problem.

ULTIMATE UPGRADE FOR VISTA

Microsoft has released the final version of the DreamScene extra for Windows Vista. The software allows users to use a video file as their desktop background, which can loop infinitely for a distracting effect.

Five videos are provided but you can use your own MPEG or WMV files. DreamScene was launched as a beta in February 2007, and is available for owners of Windows Vista Ultimate.

ACER BUYS PACKARD BELL

Computer manufacturer Acer is to buy Packard Bell, adding the big name to its list of other well-known brands. These include Gateway and eMachines. The company intends to keep all the brands separate. The move solidifies Acer's position as the third-largest PC company behind HP and Dell, and keeps it well ahead of Lenovo, which had been in talks to buy Packard Bell.

Lid cooling may be answer to hot laps

Compal Electronics has demonstrated a notebook that uses the large surface area of its lid to dissipate heat. A heat pipe in the lower part of the chassis is incorporated into the hinge mechanism, and heat is distributed from the main part of the system up to and across the back of the LCD.

Anyone who has worked on a notebook while travelling has probably suffered from excess heat from the bottom of the case. Sometimes this can just be a mild nuisance, but hot spots develop on some models and make using the notebook rather unpleasant. Anything that draws heat up and away from the base is therefore bound to be an attractive idea.

On a notebook with a standard mobile processor Compal's technique could allow the use of smaller fans running at slower speeds, which in turn would reduce the fan's noise by up to 75 per cent. More excitingly, a notebook using a low-voltage processor such as the Intel Core 2 Solo U2200 could do without a fan entirely. Beyond the obvious reduction in operating noise, such a notebook could do away with numerous ventilation holes and vents, allowing it to be far more resistant to dust and liquids.

The prototype seen by *Shopper* felt rather warm on the bottom, though we were assured this was just because the processor was being run at 100 per cent for the purposes of the demonstration. Despite this, the display was kept well below the 55°C maximum temperature at which the LCD panel was designed to operate. The temperature never rose above 50°C in the demonstration.

There have been a number of studies linking low sperm counts to using notebook PCs on the lap. Compal's technology is unlikely to help solve this problem, as most of the temperature rises in these studies was attributed to the sitting position of the user, rather than heat radiated by the notebook itself. The main advantage of the new design is an increased level of comfort, along with reduced fan noise.

Compal Electronics is a Taiwanese OEM manufacturer that supplies notebook chassis to major manufacturers such as Dell and Toshiba, as well as numerous smaller companies, so we may well see notebooks with this lid-cooling design available in the near future.



▲ Compal's lid-cooling design could do away with the need for noisy fans and save portable users a great deal of discomfort

Intel to introduce WiMAX for all

Intel is planning to introduce wireless broadband support to the next generation of notebook PCs. The company's president and CEO Paul Otellini announced plans to push WiMAX, a long-range wireless technology capable of connecting systems sites miles apart.

With over 120 million Centrino notebooks sold to date, Intel has played an important part in bringing wireless networking to the mass market. It claims it will now introduce a combined WiFi and WiMAX module as part of its upcoming Montevina platform. This

will be released at some point next year and be available for both notebooks and ultra mobile devices. Currently it is being developed under the codename Echopeak.

Otellini announced that major manufacturers, including Lenovo, Asus, Acer, Panasonic and Toshiba, have all signed up to include the module in their notebooks. Dell and HP are notable in their absence from this list.

The current Centrino platform, codenamed Santa Rosa, was originally conceived to include wireless 3.5G HSDPA capability. However, this was later dropped from the specification due to high prices and a lack of demand.

The inclusion of WiMAX as a compulsory part of the Montevina platform could befall a similar fate if demand isn't high enough to warrant it. Otellini made no mention of HSDPA and it is not clear if it will be included in future Centrino standards.

The obstacle to bringing WiMAX to the masses is not in making WiMAX-capable devices but rather in creating network coverage. Otellini argued that there are now 10 times as many WiMAX trials in the world than this time last year, with 120 trials currently in progress. To further advance the WiMAX standard, Intel has signed a new deal with Japan's second largest mobile phone operator, KDDI, to roll out widespread WiMAX coverage in Japan. Currently there is no confirmed timescale.

Otellini claimed that 150 million people would be covered by WiMAX by the end of 2008, although most of these will be in the US. Projections show that 1.3 billion people could have access to a WiMAX network by 2012. It's impossible to say when we will see widespread WiMAX in the UK, but signs are good. A number of companies, most notably Pipex, are running trials.



▲ Intel is planning WiMAX support for its next-generation notebooks

Networking sites 'a threat to privacy'

Using the internet to socialise electronically will not help create a new circle of close friends. In fact, many young users will attract the unwanted attentions of adult predators, and the sites they use fail to provide sufficient protection. These are the findings of an academic researcher and the New York Attorney General's office.

Facebook and MySpace encourage users to link to each other as 'friends', but many habitually choose to interact with complete strangers. A researcher has recently concluded that, just because you've become 'friends' with someone online, it does not mean you are actually friends.

Dr Will Reader from Sheffield Hallam University told the British Association Festival of Science: "Although the number of 'friends' people have on these sites can be massive, the number of close friends is approximately the same as in the face-to-face real world contact." Reader claimed that people require face-to-face contact when building close relationships because it is "very easy to be deceptive" over the internet.

PROTECT AND SURVIVE

While this may sound obvious, many users of internet social networking sites exhibit extreme naivety and happily share personal information with people who are, effectively, completely anonymous strangers. In late September 2007 the New York Attorney General's office subpoenaed Facebook, one of the most popular social networking sites, accusing it of failing to protect young users from sexual predators.

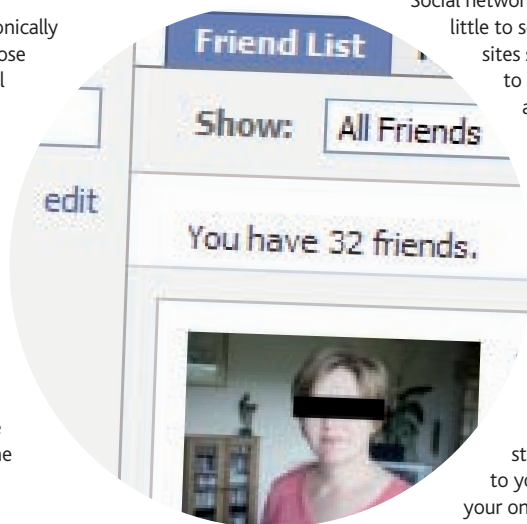
New York Attorney General Andrew Cuomo said that Facebook failed to respond to complaints and noted several defects in the site's safety controls. When undercover state investigators used the site posing as underage children, they were targeted by predatory adults and were also able to access pornographic content, including video footage. Meanwhile, Connecticut Attorney General Richard Blumenthal claimed that his office knows of at least three convicted sex offenders who are using Facebook. He indicated that this is just the tip of the iceberg.

FACE THE MUSIC

Facebook has had problems protecting its own data in the past. In August 2007 Facebook's site suffered from some configuration problems, the result of which was that some of the programming code driving the site was exposed to the public. This provided an insight into how the site works, which in turn put users' personal data at risk.

Most social networking sites allow users to hide their most personal information from the general public, making it available to only their closest friends, most likely those they see in real life and not exclusively on the internet. However, an attacker could potentially gain access to this information by using the leaked Facebook code.

Facebook says otherwise and claims in a statement that, "a small fraction of the code that displays Facebook webpages was exposed to a small number of users due to a single misconfigured web server that was fixed immediately. It was not a security breach and did not compromise user data in any way."



NEWS ANALYSIS

Is Facebook evil?

Users of social networking sites need to be more aware of the risks they're taking

Social networking is popular and packed with features, and yet it offers so little to so many. The favourite timewaster for many office workers, sites such as Facebook and MySpace offer swathes of features to keep you clicking around on the site without actually achieving anything other than leaking your personal data, creating a bad first impression of yourself for potential employers and ruining your eyes.

Facebook is incredibly popular. It contains an enormous database of college-educated users who use the site to keep in contact (a bit like using email, but more onerous), play silly games that suck the time out of their lives and upload private details that should probably be kept private. Strangers can access varying amounts of this data, depending on how savvy each user has been when setting up their privacy settings.

However, even if you've hardened your profile, someone still has access to this data. That someone is just as faceless to you as the guy or girl you've never met but who wants to be your online friend. That someone is Facebook itself.

So who are the faces behind Facebook, and why are they running a site that is essentially a massive database of personal details surrendered by millions of users? Why have three US firms invested \$25m in a site that lets you play pirate games and virtually 'poke' other users? How committed are these people to protecting your personal data? The New York Attorney General doesn't think it is committed enough (see left).

Even Facebook itself admits that it can't keep users' personal information completely secure. Its privacy page says: "We are not responsible for circumvention of any privacy settings or security measures contained on the Site." The data that Facebook claims little responsibility for includes files on users who have signed up, as well as information about users who have been invited to join by existing users, even if they themselves have not run through the registration process. This in itself is dodgy. If I send your email address to a website, there is no good reason why that site should store it forever.

In fact, Facebook won't store your email address forever, in this circumstance. However, you do have to take the initiative and contact the site directly, requesting that it removes the data about you that you did not send. It may not even be your friend's fault that they sent your email address to the company. Signing up involves a system that, if you have a Google Mail email address, requests your Google Mail password. Submit this, which is easy to do without realising the consequences, and the site will rifle through your contacts and invite each one to be your friend.

If you are the sort of person who is concerned about the privacy fallout from using store cards, which enable large companies to buy data on your shopping habits, sites such as Facebook should have you quaking with paranoiac fear. Do what no-one else does and read all of the terms and conditions. If you do, you may dig out little juicy nuggets such as the paragraph where Facebook reserves the right to investigate you and store the results of its research electronically.

Specifically, the site warns that it "may also collect information about you from other sources, such as newspapers, blogs, instant messaging services, and other users of the Facebook service". If it does this, it's hard to imagine why this will be for your own benefit and easy to see how it could cause problems. If nothing else, it is unclear who else will have access to this research and unclear as to how easy it would be for you to discover its extent and accuracy.

Simon Edwards

Web developer and security expert

IN BRIEF

HOMES GET MORE STORAGE SPACE

lomega has introduced network-based storage that costs around the same as a basic hard disk.

The new Home Network Hard Drive models range from 320GB to 500GB. The smallest model costs £100 while the larger one is £200.

The advantage of these disks over standard external hard disks is that they can share their storage with any computers connected to the local network. If you just need somewhere to dump digital photos and music files, this is a cheaper and less complicated option than running your own file server, even when Windows Home Server arrives.

PHONE CHARGERS TO BE STANDARDISED

A forum of leading mobile phone manufacturers has agreed to settle on one type of mobile phone charger. The Open Mobile Terminal Platform, which includes LG, Nokia, Motorola, Samsung and Sony Ericsson, will use the micro-USB connector as standard. This connector is smaller than the mini-USB ports you often see on digital cameras, satnav equipment and other personal devices.

COMMODORE GETS NEW OWNER – AGAIN

Three years after it sold Commodore, IT firm Tulip wants to buy it back again. There are currently two companies that use the Commodore name: Commodore Gaming (which, as we reported last month, recently launched a high-end gaming PC) and Commodore International Corporation (CIC). Tulip is interested in CIC, which specialises in multimedia mobile devices and services.

AMAZON OPENS MUSIC DOWNLOADS STORE

Amazon's US website is now providing music downloads that are free of copy protection. Amazon MP3 contains over two million DRM-free tracks from two out of the four major record companies. It also has music from thousands of independent labels. The lack of DRM means the files will play on virtually every portable music player on the market. While EMI and Universal Music have provided their content, Sony BMG and Warner have yet to join.

Mobile phones 'don't cause cancer'

The UK's largest research programme investigating the dangers posed by mobile phones has found no evidence of a link to cancer. It also failed to find any association between using a mobile phone and developing adverse health effects of any kind.

The programme, which is funded by the government and the mobile phone industry, has so far "found no association between short-term mobile phone use and brain cancer" and was unable to link mobile phones with the problems experienced by sufferers of electrical hypersensitivity. The research is the world's largest-ever study of electrical hypersensitivity.

The Mobile Telecommunications & Health Research Programme (MTHR) emphasised that its research spans six years and so cannot predict the health implications of using a mobile phone for a longer period of time. However, its research into the effect mobile signals has on cells and tissues is promising. When it investigated whether mobile phones might cause effects on cells and tissues other than simply heating them, it found nothing. It said: "The results so far show no evidence for this and the committee believes there is no need to support further work in this area."

To date the programme has published 23 studies, which combine data from the UK and studies from other northern European countries. While it has found no evidence that mobile phones cause problems in the brain, it is unable to say categorically that mobile phones are safe. It also notes that more research into children's health needs to be conducted.



▲ Mobile phones pose no risk to health, according to research

Free Skype calls to go mobile

Mobile operator 3 is planning to introduce an inexpensive phone that can make free calls over the internet. The handset will use voice-over IP (VoIP) technology to send data over fast 3G connections. It will be available on both a contract and pay-as-you-go deal.

The VoIP system uses Skype, which has an estimated 2.5 million users in the UK alone. This makes it possible

for customers to be able to call friends and family who are already Skype users.

There will still be a cost associated with using the internet with a mobile phone, but 3G pricing could drop soon due to impending competition in the area. This is likely because UK regulator Ofcom recently proposed the opening of radio spectrum bands to allow the launch of new high-speed mobile services.

Super-fast USB3 on way

A new USB standard will be released early next year. Intel has announced that USB3 will appear in the first half of 2008, providing an estimated 4,800Mbit/s, meaning that it will be able to transfer data ten times faster than USB2. The new standard will be backwardly compatible with earlier USB products.

"USB3 is the next logical step for the PC's most popular wired connectivity," said Jeff Ravencraft, technology strategist of Intel. "The digital era requires high-speed performance and reliable connectivity to move the enormous amounts of digital content now present in everyday life."

Companies including HP have claimed that USB3 will improve customers' experiences when connecting digital cameras and printers, although the most impressive use of USB3 will be when transferring large files such as HD video to high-capacity hard disks. Filling a USB3-compatible music player would also take a fraction of the time than is currently possible with USB2.

Clippy turns hacker

Microsoft's 'helpful' Office assistant becomes a security threat

Clippy the paperclip is more evil than you thought. The annoying and much reviled animated character first appeared in Office 97, offering to help users but largely irritating them. Researchers have now discovered that the so-called Microsoft Agent can be hoodwinked by hackers to provide them with access to the computer.

Victims would simply need to visit a malicious or infected site for Clippy, officially known as Clippit, to throw open the doors of Windows 2000 SP4 PCs. So, instead of merely being an obstacle to productivity, the intrusive avatar is a security liability. Microsoft has now released an update that patches the affected code.

The Clippy character, and the function that he performs, was so unpopular that Microsoft actually made a feature of his absence when it launched Office XP. A Microsoft promotional video, now available on YouTube (<http://tinyurl.com/38ux4v>), shows an Office user raging at the 'helpful' paperclip, exclaiming, "You are the most annoying thing in computer history!" The Microsoft Assistant feature remained in Office XP, but it was disabled by default.



▲ The annoying – and, it would appear, dangerous – Clippy



First looks

Every month we bring you sneak previews of the latest kit from www.computershopper.co.uk

Oregon ATC2K Action Cam

Camcorders are great for making videos of parties, weddings and holidays, but for more active pursuits such as cycling or skiing, you usually need both your hands free. The Action Cam is designed to capture daredevil activities without getting in the way of the fun.

At first glance it looks like a telescopic sight for a rifle. The slim front has a small recessed lens, while the fatter rear opens up to take two AA batteries and an SD card. The whole thing feels very sturdily constructed, so should take a few knocks and bumps.

The CMOS sensor inside can capture video at resolutions up to 640x480 at up to 30fps. There's a paltry 32MB of built-in memory, which is only good for a couple of minutes of footage, so you'll probably want to buy a 2GB SD card, which will store around an hour of footage.

The camera captures video to Motion JPEG (M-JPEG) files. It's an odd choice, as the compression used by this file

format is poorly suited to the fast action you'll want to record. The results look rather jerky, even at the top 30fps setting, and we didn't feel they did full justice to the subject matter. We noticed that the image stretched towards the top and bottom of the picture, too, which was very distracting.

The Action Cam comes with a variety of clips and straps so you can attach it to a helmet or the handlebars of a bike. It's fairly lightweight, and so shouldn't slow you down.

The camera housing and design is well designed, but video quality is rather disappointing. However, for only £100 from www.firebox.com it's tempting if you need to capture some unrepeatable extreme sports experiences.



Sling Media Slingbox Pro

The original Slingbox impressed us enough to earn a Best Buy award (*Shopper*, Sept 2006). Once installed in your home and connected to your broadband router it allowed you to watch TV programmes on your laptop or Windows-based PDA from anywhere in the world with an internet connection.

The new Slingbox Pro changes the original formula only slightly. Instead of just an S-video input and output, the Slingbox Pro has S-video, composite and an HD input/output. While the latter looks like an HDMI connector, it's a proprietary interface that is used with the breakout cable to connect devices with component connections. The Slingbox Pro now streams video to other PCs in the house at up to 8Mbit/s, a significant increase over the original Slingbox's 2.5Mbit/s streams.

But don't be fooled into thinking that this means you can watch Sky HD on your laptop in a hotel room in Shanghai. The quality of the

video is almost entirely dependent on the upload speed of your broadband connection, which is always much slower than the download speed. An 8Mbit/s service refers to the download speed. The upload speed will be around 1Mbit/s. This is nowhere near fast enough for HD video.

The other disappointment is the continued absence of wireless networking, meaning you'll have to spend extra on HomePlug devices or a wireless bridge if your router isn't in the same room as the Pro.

Having said that, the £170 Slingbox Pro is still a great way to watch local TV and access the recorded programmes on your PVR when you're out of the house.



£30 camcorder from Currys

Most camcorders cost hundreds of pounds, so we were intrigued when we heard about the £30 Disgo Video. It's about the size of a packet of cigarettes, feels fairly sturdy and weighs only about 150g including batteries.

It shoots video at a resolution of 320x240 pixels. Because of this, the results look more like a camera phone's video mode than footage from a MiniDV camcorder. Unlike many camera phones, it keeps up a steady 30 frames per second, so movement and panning shots don't turn into a blur. However, the video shows a lot of noise in gloomy conditions and it's next to useless in very low lighting.

You'll get around 60 minutes of video on a 1GB SD card, one of which is included. The camera takes two AA batteries, also included, and these didn't run out during our tests. It comes with basic video-editing software for putting together your own movies. Alternatively, there's an output for composite video and mono sound so you can connect it to

your TV. However, the quality of the video looks very poor on a large screen.

There are four buttons on the back that control all the functions. The 2in LCD isn't very bright, but gives you a fair impression of what the results will look like. There's no zoom so, if you want a close-up, you'll just have to move nearer your subject. A tiny microphone is built-in, and there's a small speaker on the rear for playback. Audio quality is good enough to hear what your subjects are saying, unless there's a lot of background noise.

The Disgo Video is ideal for situations where you want to shoot video for posting online but don't want to risk using a proper camcorder or even your phone. It would also be an ideal present for kids, as it's both easy to use and hard to break. The Disgo Video is available now from www.currys.com.

